

Local Universities and Employment Opportunities in Somaliland

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I.

Every year, a series of graduation ceremonies are organized at the local institutions of higher learning in Somaliland, where hundreds of new graduates emerge from the local universities. The main fields of study at the universities often overlap. Business administration, management, education, law, economics, ICT, and, to a lesser extent, medicine and engineering are the largest concentration areas.

On one hand, it is a bold step taken towards the road to reconstruction and development. Thousands of young men and women, who otherwise might have been lured into unproductive and destructive behaviors, are now concentrating on positive competencies that could impact the national economy positively—if utilized wisely and skillfully. On the other hand, if action-oriented and sustainable strategies aimed at job creation are not worked out, it would risk the positive steps scored so far. There are some schools of thought that are seriously concerned about the ratio of unemployed job seekers to job openings. Hence, the fear is that this negative development could possibly lead to the deterioration of the already precarious situation. To this end, if the government of Somaliland does not seriously focus on unemployment and come up with a sound and remunerative policy that absorbs at least a portion of these new graduates, the mushrooming higher education establishments will not survive on abstract promises. Consequently, the absence of these opportunities will not only compound already ongoing illegal immigration, thus exacerbating the continuous

brain drain, but will increase the involvement of the youth in crime and other socially destructive activities.

Reports indicate that a good number of local graduates managed to secure jobs inside and outside of Somaliland, but it is also the case that the vast majority of the graduates remain unemployed or, at best, underemployed. For that reason, the government needs to speedily review this condition and decisively act, as the number of graduating students is increasing year-in year-out, before it jeopardizes the hard-won and relative civic peace and political stability. The following thoughts might offer some help to address this highly pressing issue.

II.

A. Students

Studying seriously and always being prepared for the acute scarcity of jobs in the employment market ought to be a cardinal perspective for every student. More precisely, one ought to be equipped with these indispensable personal attributes: *competency, critical thinking, and creativity*. In addition to Somali, speaking English fluently and learning how to write it well, plus good quantitative abilities, are extremely essential in all vocations in this age of competitive globalization. These are often in short supply in Somaliland.

Government ministries, parastatals, and non-governmental organizations should not be the only ticket for employment. Young graduates must be creative and proactive and, therefore, a good number should have the ambition to become social entrepreneurs and come up with economically daring initiatives. For instance, organizing themselves into groups to form community-based organizations, starting consultancy firms and research centers, and initiating small businesses that do not need huge capital investments could be gateways to a productive and satisfying career.

B. Ministry of Education/Higher Education Institutions

The pivotal Ministry of Education should make its first duty to ensure a high quality curriculum for pre-university education. This is the basis for everything. Comprehensive screening and placement mechanisms should be put in place and painstakingly applied at all times and situations—a prerequisite for enrollment and success at a university. Sec-

ond, higher education academic curricula should aim to compete with the best in East Africa. Some of the ways to keep attentive eyes on quality include a review of the work of each faculty member at the end of every academic year, paying the faculty a comparatively decent salary and benefits commensurate with the level of effective teaching, scholarly achievements, and contributions to the building of the institution. The end point of all of this must be an education of each student that includes a combination of acquiring a marketable and specific skills and the appetite for continuing life-long learning across a wide arc of experiences.

Thus, the current assumption that everyone is planning to go to university is untenable. One way to modify this unrealistic expectation is to introduce and invest in rigorous two-year technical colleges that will produce qualified individuals in functional areas already in short supply (e.g., carpentry, electronics, accounting, mechanics, architecture, masonry, landscaping, cookery, and hospitality). Additionally, such technical colleges would offer students the ability to earn a good income in a relatively shorter time period, while still performing a valuable service to the community. Beyond this level, the ministry must set up and institutionalize the criteria for effective leadership and the structural capacity of the recently established Higher Education Commission so as to empower it to carry out its mandated tasks diligently.

C. National Employment Commission

The creation of a sound National Employment Commission is long overdue. The primary aim would be to examine the employment trends in Somaliland as well as generate ideas that would increase gainful opportunities for the youth. The responsibility will include reviewing all major investments undertaken in the country and the potential for job creation.

At present, government agencies create hundreds of new jobs each year but filling these new posts is neither systematic, nor competitive, nor transparent. In fact, nepotism is a familiar approach. A fundamental reform of the prevailing practice, coupled with the enactment of an improved and binding legal framework to create a more just and professional working environment for all, would partially ease the unemployment predicament as well as valorize civic belonging among all Somalilanders. Lastly, the commission could establish partnerships

with the major forces in the private sector, diaspora communities, aid agencies, and donors.

D. Development Partners

Many and continuing complaints are expressed about the poor capacity and low absorption ability of the local partners, mainly from the government's side. With the appearance of graduates with the prerequisite capacities, development partners will be expected to deepen their work in the country and take advantage of this pool of relatively qualified staff. Furthermore, these partners ought to make part of their priorities to offer opportunities for the upgrading of the technical, managerial, and communicative skills of their staff.

E. Business Community

The business community is currently doing a laudable job and contributing to economic growth, though at a slower pace. However, there is a clear need to play a greater and proactive role in economic development by systematically creating jobs and selecting the right candidates in open and competitive processes. Members of the Somaliland business class ought to move away from the traditional practice of hiring relatives (who are often unfit for many of the posts) and adopt the incapable culture of recruiting through qualifications and competitive excellence. This will mean the professionalization of their workers.

F. Diaspora

Somalilanders in the diaspora are often credited with remitting millions of dollars to their family members back home. While this is a commendable move and needs to be maintained—at least in the near future—it is, however, high time for those folks in the diaspora to proceed to another stage of development: to help in the struggle to create jobs for the unemployed citizens. There are many opportunities for the diaspora to invest in Somaliland's agriculture, ranching, fishing, largely unexploited mineral assets, rising service industry, and other activities that could boost local production and international trade.

III.

Finally, there is the ever-present general addiction to *qat*. In addition to the severely deleterious impact of the habit on community health, its economic destructiveness (both at the household and national levels) is undeniable. In Somaliland, the importation of the drug costs around \$350 million a year. Saving even a third of that amount will go a long way to rebuild the atrocious roads, make clean water available for many more, and invest in new sources of energy. A national initiative of this sort will immediately generate numerous jobs at many different skill levels. But to drastically lessen *qat* consumption and then appropriate the savings for investment in the quality of life of the people of Somaliland will first require deep and unwavering cultural transformation at the individual and household levels, the collective *mentalité*, and a national leadership that is an exemplar of the new time.